

PROCRASTINATION AND PERSONAL IDENTITY¹
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As Ilia Ilitch Oblomov was perfectly aware when he woke up, there were a great many things that he had to do.² For one thing, he had to reply to an alarming letter from his estate manager. So, as soon as he woke up, he formed the intention to get out of bed, have his tea, and do some serious thinking in order to decide which measures had to be taken to save his estate. But after half an hour spent worrying about the intention he had formed, Oblomov judged he could just as well have his tea while in bed as he usually did; nothing, he thought, would prevent him from thinking while being stretched out. And as the morning proceeded, he just kept postponing doing any thinking, taking any action, and even getting out of bed. Indeed, Oblomov spent his entire life putting off the things he had to do, so that in the end, he died in poverty and loneliness.

Oblomov's procrastination clearly had a very high cost, something of which he must have been aware. What, one wonders, does this apparent lack of concern for one's future entail with respect to our conception of personal identity? It would seem that Oblomov fails to consider his future as truly his own. If so, procrastination would point in the opposite direction of phenomena such as promising, which have been used to argue against reductionist accounts of personal identity that place psychological continuity at the heart of personal identity.³ My aim in this chapter is to examine what procrastination entails with respect to personal identity theories.

My plan is the following. In the first section, I explain why the kind of concern we seem to have for what have been called our "future selves" has been thought to be problematic for psychological continuity theories of personal identity. An important assumption in these debates is that we normally have what is often referred to as a

¹ An earlier version of this chapter was presented at the New York CSMN procrastination workshop organised by Chrisoula Andreou and Mark White, whom I wish to thank. For helpful input, I would like to thank George Ainslie, Jennifer Baker, Christopher Cowley, David Shoemaker, Olav Gjelsvik, Joe Heath, Jennifer Hornsby, David Hunter, Daniel Laurier, Duncan MacIntosh, Bruce Maxwell, Elijah Milgram, Frédéric Nef, David Owens, Sergio Tenenbaum, Manuel Utset, Mark White, and especially Chrisoula Andreou, David Shoemaker, and Sarah Stroud. My work was supported by the Canada Research Chair program, which I gratefully acknowledge.

² See Ivan Goncharov, *Oblomov*.

³ See Bernard Williams, "Persons, Character and Morality," p. 7.

“special concern” for our future selves. I think this assumption is far from warranted, something that becomes particularly clear when one considers procrastination. In the second section, I turn to procrastination with the aim of getting a better understanding of its nature. In the third section, I consider the ways in which procrastination involves harming one’s future selves. I argue that in most cases of imprudent procrastination, the procrastinator imposes an uncompensated burden on her future self, something that is best explained by a lack of concern for her future self. Finally, in the fourth section, I conclude with some remarks on the lessons that follow for personal identity theories. I suggest that the objections to psychological continuity accounts based on the idea of a special concern we have, or have reason to have, for our future selves are in serious trouble.

“Special concern” and personal identity theories

We usually take it for granted that whatever kind of beings we happen to be, we are beings who persist over time. When we project into the future, such as when we plan for a holiday, when we sign a contract or when we make a promise, we, and the people around us, assume that *we now* are the same, numerically speaking, as *we in the past* and *we in the future*. In particular, each of us appears to have a special concern for what he or she considers his or her own future. We seem to care in a very special way for how our so-called “future selves” will fare. As John Perry noted, when I am told that someone will be run over by a truck tomorrow, I might be saddened, feel pity and think reflectively about the frailty of life. But if my informer adds that I am the person who will be run over “a whole new set of emotions rise in (my) heart”⁴: fear or even panic will overcome me. The thought that death awaits *me* and not some other person seems to make an important difference with respect to the kind of emotion that one feels. In the same way, the thought that good things will happen to *me* rather than to someone else seems to make a difference. The hostage who is told that someone else from the group will be liberated might feel happy for that person, but she might also feel envy. If she is told that she is the one to be liberated, her attitude is likely to change to hope or joy.

⁴ See John Perry, “The Importance of Being Identical,” p. 66.

The concern in question, then, seems to involve being disposed to undergo a range of emotions, depending on how our future selves fare: fear if we think that things will go badly for them, happiness if we think that they will go well, hope if we think that there is a fair chance that they will improve, etc.⁵ It is a kind of caring. We normally care for a number of different persons. What is special about the concern we have for our future selves is simply the intensity of the emotions that are involved.⁶ We usually care more for our future selves than we care for the future of other persons.

It has been suggested that the special concern we have for our own future is a natural feature, one which we share with other living things, and which is the result of natural selection. As Derek Parfit puts it, “animals without such concern would be more likely to die before passing on their genes.”⁷ In fact, this is not as obvious as Parfit suggests. A being that readily sacrifices itself for its offspring might in fact be much more successful in spreading its genes.

Whether natural and fitness-enhancing or not, the putative fact that we have a special concern for beings we consider to be our future selves has long been thought to make for an important objection to reductionist conceptions of personal identity. In particular, it has been argued that psychological continuity accounts sit ill with the alleged fact that we have this special sort of concern.

According to the best known version of such accounts, namely Parfit’s, X at t1 is the same person as Y at t2 if and only if X is uniquely psychologically continuous with Y, where psychological continuity consists in overlapping chains of strong psychological connectedness, itself consisting in significant numbers of direct psychological connections.⁸ So, what is needed is the holding of particular psychological connections, such as when I remember having climbed the Gran Paradiso or when I now act on a New Year’s Eve resolution to play the clarinet more often. Since I might now have forgotten

⁵ For that notion, see David Shoemaker, “Caring, Identification, and Agency.”

⁶ See Jennifer Whiting, “Friends and Future Selves,” p. 557 for the claim that other types of relations can come with and seem to justify the same kind of concern as the one we have for ourselves. When a mother is told that it is her own child who is going to be run over, she is likely to be overcome not by some vague sadness and pity, but by fear and panic.

⁷ Derek Parfit, *Reasons and Persons*, p. 308. For the naturalness claim, see John McDowell, “Reductionism and the First Person,” p. 246, and Mark Johnston, “Human Concerns Without Superlative Selves,” pp. 158-59.

⁸ See Parfit, *Reasons and Persons*, p. 207. See also David Shoemaker, “Personal Identity and Ethics.”

things I could remember ten years ago, what is required is that there are overlapping chains of such connections. The strength of the psychological connectedness is a matter of quantity. What is required is that X and Y have a significant number of psychological connections, not just that Y has one or two memories related to X's experiences, for instance. It has to be noted that Parfit's psychological criterion also requires that there is no "branching." That means that cases in which X has continuous psychologies with two or more putative future selves are excluded by definition; this is why Y has to be *uniquely* continuous with X.

In brief, the "special concern" argument against psychological continuity accounts starts with the claim that such accounts entail that our future selves are in fact not numerically identical with our present selves.⁹ This would only be so if one postulated some entity, such as a soul or a Cartesian ego, to which the past, present and future experiences would belong. But if it is true that our future selves are not numerically identical with our present selves (or at least if it is true that we do not take ourselves to be numerically identical with our future selves), it should not be expected that we have such a special concern for our future selves. Rather, we would expect that our feelings towards them would be more like the feelings we have with respect to the future of other people. However, since we have this special concern, there must be something wrong in the assumption that we are not numerically identical with our future selves.

Furthermore, and this in fact makes for a different argument, it would seem that if we are not numerically identical with any future being, no special concern of the kind envisaged would be justified or rationally required. The problem, it is claimed, is that it is natural to think that we have reason to have such a concern for our futures selves. Prudence might indeed be thought as involving the claim that we are rationally required to have such a concern for our future selves, or maybe even more stringently, that we are rationally required to have an *equal concern* for our present and futures selves. This, in any case, is what Sidgwick thought: "my feelings a year hence should be just as important to me as my feelings next minute, if only I could make an equally sure forecast of them. Indeed this equal and impartial concern for all parts of one's conscious life is

⁹ This argument goes back to objections to the Lockean theory of personal identity. See Joseph Butler, "Of Personal Identity," and Henry Sidgwick, *The Methods of Ethics*, p. 419.

perhaps the most prominent element in the common notion of the *rational* – as opposed to the merely *impulsive* – pursuits of pleasure.”¹⁰ Thus, an important objection to psychological continuity accounts, which goes back to Parfit’s “extreme claim,”¹¹ is that on such accounts, a present self has no reason to be concerned about her future selves, or in any case, that she has no more reason to be concerned about her future selves than she has to be concerned about the future of other people.¹²

The question of whether or not this second objection is convincing has been extensively discussed. Some, such as John Perry, have argued that psychological continuity accounts can make room for reasons to have a special concern for one’s future selves even if we don’t assume that we are numerically identical with our future selves. After all, our future selves are the most likely to carry out the projects for which we care.¹³ Others, such as Parfit himself, claim that we ought to bite the bullet: no such special concern would be rationally required. This does not mean that it is right to act against the interest of one’s future selves, for as Parfit suggests, we might want to extend our moral theory and claim that acting against one’s interest in one’s old age is, or at least can be, morally wrong.¹⁴

More drastically, the existence of a relation between theories of personal identity and issues regarding our attitudes towards our future selves has been questioned. Thus, Susan Wolf has argued that these two issues are independent.¹⁵ We can happily adopt a reductionist account of personal identity while justifying the special concern we have for ourselves, for such a justification depends on completely different considerations, such as the good that follows from a concern for persons, and more particularly for the person that we are ourselves. Whether persons are constituted by temporal slices or not would have nothing to do with the kind of concern we have and are justified to have.

¹⁰ Sidgwick, *The Methods of Ethics*, p. 124, fn. 1, quoted by Perry, “The Importance of Being Identical,” p. 88. Also see Jennifer Whiting, “Friends and Future Selves,” and David Shoemaker, “Personal Identity and Practical Concerns,” p. 362.

¹¹ See Parfit, *Reasons and Persons*, pp. 307-312.

¹² See Whiting, “Friends and Future Selves,” for the distinction between different versions of the extreme claim.

¹³ See Perry, “The Importance of Being Identical”.

¹⁴ See Parfit, *Reasons and Persons*, pp. 318-20.

¹⁵ See Susan Wolf, “Self-Interest and Interest in Selves.”

One important assumption in these debates is that we normally have a special concern for what we consider to be our future selves. John Perry starts his paper “The Importance of Being Identical” with the following claim: “(m)ost of us have a special and intense interest in what will happen to us.”¹⁶ The question I am interested in is to what extent it is true that we have such a special and intense interest or concern for our future selves.

It would seem clearly wrong to claim that we *necessarily* have such a special concern for our future selves. There is thus a contrast with the concern we have for our present selves. It is certainly plausible to claim that because it seems inconceivable that we should be indifferent to our present pains and pleasures, a special concern for our present selves is necessary.¹⁷ But there seems to be no conceptual impossibility involved in the claim that we can lack any concern whatsoever for our future selves, that is, that we should be quite indifferent to their pains and pleasures, not to mention their more general interests and projects.

But maybe it is true that human beings normally have such a special concern. To fail to have this concern would be pathological. As Fabio Sani reminds us, a “lack, or seriously weakened sense, of self continuity is considered one of the most typical disorders of the self. . . . Some people suffering from schizophrenia, organic states, or neuroses and depression may experience this condition.”¹⁸ Sani mentions the cases of the psychotic patient who considered his past self as a little dwarf inside himself.¹⁹ It doesn’t take much effort to make up a forward-looking syndrome of the same kind: one can easily imagine the case of a Kafka reader, who believes his future self is some monstrous cockroach, whose future schemes have to be counteracted. Thus, one might be tempted to claim that it is only in some abnormal and pathological cases that there is a lack of emotional identification with one’s past or future self. If so, maybe one could put aside such cases when discussing the nature of personal identity.

¹⁶ Perry, “The Importance of Being Identical,” p. 66.

¹⁷ See Sydney Shoemaker “Comments,” p. 121; Amy Kind “The Metaphysics of Personal Identity and Our Special Concern for the Future,” p. 547. Note however that certain drugs and some forms of leukotomy can lead patients to insist that they still *have* the pain, but no longer *mind* it (see Daniel Dennett “Why We Can’t Make a Computer Feel Pain”). The question is whether the patients are right when they claim they feel pain.

¹⁸ Fabio Sani “Introduction and Overview,” p. 3.

¹⁹ See Jaspers, *General Psychopathology*, reported in Sani, “Introduction and Overview,” p. 3.

This would be a mistake. As I shall argue, the lack of concern for one's future self need not be pathological; it is as at least as common as procrastination. But what exactly is procrastination?

Kinds of procrastination

Procrastination involves putting things off, deciding to do something later.²⁰ But of course, not any putting off will amount to procrastination. A first point is that the putting off has to be free. If it were under threat, with a gun pointed at him that Oblomov reluctantly decided to stay in bed a bit longer, his putting off getting out of bed hardly would count as procrastination. Correlatively, Oblomov has to be free, or at least to believe to be free, to perform, be it now or later, the action that he puts off. And he has to either be able to perform it or at least believe that he is able to perform it. If he did not believe he was free and able to perform that action later, he could hardly decide to put it off.²¹ But freely putting off of an action that one believes one is free and able to perform is not yet procrastination. If Oblomov decided to have his tea a bit later because he wanted to first finish writing his letter, this certainly would not constitute procrastination. There must be something *wrong* in the putting off for it to consist in procrastination.

Maury Silver and John Sabini argue that the kind of wrongness that must be involved is irrationality, and the irrationality they have in mind seems to be of the same kind as that which is usually attributed to akratic actions, that is, to actions which are freely and intentionally performed in spite of the agent's better judgment.²² The irrationality in question thus comes from the conflict between what one does and what one knows or believes one ought to be doing. In Silver and Sabini's terms, "putting offs are procrastination only when they are irrational, and the irrationality is caused by

²⁰ As the Latin etymology of the terms indicates, *pro* means "for" or "towards," and *crastinus* means "of tomorrow," from *cras*, which means "tomorrow."

²¹ It often happens that by putting off doing something, one ends up being unable to do it. But if someone puts off with the intention of ensuring that she will be unable to perform the action, this would not count as procrastination; in fact, it would hardly count as genuine putting off. (Thanks to David Shoemaker for raising this issue.)

²² See Stroud and Tappolet, "Introduction."

recognizing (or fancying) what one ought to be doing.”²³ So, according to them, Oblomov would need to know (recognize) or believe (fancy) that he ought to take his tea before writing his letter in order for his putting off to amount to procrastination. There are certainly cases in which this is what happens. In analogy with *clear-eyed akrasia*, we might call such cases “clear-eyed procrastination.”

However, there are also cases in which the agent changes her mind when the time of action comes. Before going to bed, Oblomov might have judged that he has to get up at 8:00 AM the next morning to write his letter, and he might even form the corresponding resolution, but when the time comes, the warmth and comfort of his bed makes him change his mind, something which he is likely to regret. In such cases, there might be a preference shift. On the day before, his preference was to get up at 8, while when the time comes to get out of bed, his preference is to stay in bed longer. In fact, there might be cases in which there is no such previous judgment, resolution, or preference, but it is simply true that one has more reason to do an action by a given time, something one could have easily realised had one done proper thinking; but when the time comes one nonetheless decides to do the action later.²⁴ Indeed, it would seem that what is likely to cause the failure to see one’s reason clearly is the aversion to perform the action which one ultimately postpones.

Thus, what is wrong with putting offs that constitute procrastination cannot only come from the conflict between judgment and action. While in clear-eyed cases, there is a conflict between the agent’s judgment and her motivation, there are cases in which the practical judgment aligns itself with the motivation to put off. The definition Chrisoula Andreou gives leaves open the possibility of such cases, which could be called *blind procrastination*. According to her, procrastination consists in putting off, sometimes indefinitely, what one should, relative to one’s ends and information, have done sooner.²⁵ As long as the agent fails to make the judgment that, given her ends and her information,

²³ Maury Silver and John Sabini, “Procrastinating,” p. 211; see also Chrisoula Andreou, “Understanding Procrastination,” for the assumption that procrastination has to be irrational putting off.

²⁴ The reasons at stake are internal reasons, which the agent could easily access if she did some thinking. Putting off an action for which the agent has external reasons, or even reasons that are not easily accessed, clearly fails to count as procrastination. On the distinction between internal and external reasons, see Williams, “Internal and External Reasons.”

²⁵ Andreou, “Understanding Procrastination,” p. 183.

she should do a given action at a given time instead of later, that kind of procrastination is not clear-eyed.

The problem with this definition is that it does not allow for cases in which the agent's ends and information, or put differently, her reasons, militate in favor of the putting off, but the agent fails to realize this and erroneously judges that the action ought to be performed at or by a certain time rather than later.²⁶ Oblomov might on balance have more reason not to get up that morning. Let us suppose that in fact he needs more sleep and would not be able to write the letter. Though being aware of this, he judges that he ought to get up. His failing to get up will thus constitute a case of procrastination. But given that his reasons are on balance in favor of putting off, the procrastination can be considered to be reasonable. This does not mean that there is nothing wrong or irrational involved in the putting off. For one thing, the judgment is irrational, for it fails to properly represent the agent's reasons. Moreover, what is also irrational about such cases is the conflict between the practical judgment and the decision. However, just as in the cases of akratic actions, in which the agent's reason and her practical judgment come apart, procrastinating can be less unreasonable or irrational than not putting off an action.

In order to take into account the different kinds of cases I have discussed, we need a broader definition. Here is what I propose:

(P) S procrastinates with respect to action A iff

- a) S is or believes he or she is free and able to do A at t and at t+n, and
- b) S's reasons require or are believed by S to require doing A at the latest at t, but
- c) when t comes, S freely decides to do A at t+n.²⁷

A final point I would like to stress is that, depending on the kind of action involved, two cases can be distinguished. In some cases, the action that is postponed is just a one-off action, like writing a letter or getting married. But procrastination often concerns

²⁶ See Alison McIntyre, "Is Akratic Action Always Irrational," as well as Robert Audi, "Weakness of Will and Rational Action," and Nomi Arpaly, "On Acting Rationally against One's Best Judgment."

²⁷ As Olav Gjelsvik pointed out to me, the agent could decide to put off the action, but nonetheless perform that action at the right time. So maybe we should require that the decision to postpone the action is successful. However, given her decision to put off the action, I would be inclined to count such cases as procrastination even if the agent happened to perform the action at right time.

extended action, such as exercising, dieting or smoking. For a smoker, smoking a cigarette is just one among the many elements which constitute the extended action of smoking. So, to stop smoking altogether requires not smoking this and all the other cigarettes that one might have smoked. Typically, what will happen is that once someone has decided to stop smoking altogether, she postpones putting an end to her habit by smoking yet another cigarette, so that she might never end her habit.

Now, in all these cases, there is something irrational with procrastination. The question is whether procrastination involves dissociation from one's future self.

An assault on the self

In a telling passage, Silver and Sabini describe procrastination as involving “an assault on the self, one the actor appreciates.”²⁸ What kind of assault on the self does procrastination involve? And does this assault involve a lack of concern for one's future selves? The voluntary infliction of pain or of a burden to oneself need not involve dissociation from one's present self, let alone from one's future selves. But as will become clear, procrastination often involves harming one's future selves in a way that clearly seems to manifest a lack of concern for them.²⁹

Let me first put aside cases of *immoral procrastination*, that is, cases in which procrastination produces harm, but the harm is inflicted on some other person. To avoid any ambiguity, we can assume that the agent has no psychological ties to the person on which she imposes a burden. For example, someone might procrastinate sending a letter in which she confesses to some terrible crime and would thereby clear a wrongly accused person. In such cases, her *will* may fail to be properly extended. She may suffer from a radical preference shift when the time to act approaches. Her initial preference to confess may yield to the preference to stay put. She might also be internally divided. This will be so if this is a case of clear-eyed procrastination, in which the agent judges that she ought to perform the act now, but she nonetheless puts it off. But such cases certainly do not

²⁸ Silver and Sabini, “Procrastinating,” p. 208.

²⁹ Note that not all conflicts between time-slices of selves involve a lack of concern. Consider George Ainslie's example of Ulysses now plotting against his future self (*Breakdown of the Will*, p. 40): clearly it is because he cares for his future self and wants to protect him against the Sirens that he arranges that his future self gets attached to the mast of the ship.

suggest that there is a lack of identification with one's future selves. Quite on the contrary, intense self-concern is likely to be at the root of immoral procrastination. It's because you care too much for yourself that you fail to do what you had correctly seen to be the morally right action.

Thus, procrastination need not involve a lack of concern for one's future self. However, there is wide range of cases in which it does. This is so in the vast majority of *imprudent procrastination* cases, which involve postponing something that is necessary, or believed to be necessary by the agent, for the well-being of his future selves.

The first cases of imprudent procrastination that will come to mind are likely to be ones involving extended actions. You have the familiar examples of the smokers, who put off quitting and instead have one more cigarette; the obese, who put off the diet and have another piece of cake; the intellectuals, who put off exercising, and so on. As Andreou points out, such cases can be considered to involve an intertemporal free-rider problem.³⁰ The present self fails to contribute her share to maintain or produce a "collective" good, that is the good, such as health or fitness, which the present agent and all her future selves hope to share.

According to Andreou, such cases need not involve a lack of emotional identification with one's future selves. The reason, according to her, is that the cost of the putting off might well be minimal. The cost of smoking yet another cigarette or having yet another piece of cake, say, may be so small that it is reasonable to see it as insignificant. In such cases, it is correct to say that "she can face this inter-temporal free-rider problem even if she cares about and identifies with... her future self... For she may correctly see her current decision as to whether or not to stay on task as negligible relative to a long-term goal and to her future well-being."³¹

Is this correct? What has to be stressed is that these cases usually involve reiteration. Given this, the imposed burden is in general very substantial; by repeatedly discounting even negligible costs, the agent ends up seriously harming herself.³² The question is whether this involves a lack of emotional identification with the agent's future

³⁰ "Coping with Procrastination." Note that since the future selves cannot be expected to do anything in the present, the analogy with intra-personal free-riding is imperfect. (Thanks to Sarah Stroud for pointing this out.)

³¹ "Coping with Procrastination," p. XXX.

³² Thanks to Sarah Stroud for pointing this out.

selves. Given that the repetition itself is not intentional—it is not the case that the agent decides to repeatedly put off ending her smoking habit—it might be argued that such cases do not involve any lack of concern at any given moment. However, the simple fact that the agent repeatedly procrastinates and thereby harms her future selves is in itself a good reason to attribute to her a lack of concern for her future selves. Clearly, if she were really worried about the well-being of her future selves, she would not do something that puts their health at risk.

Moreover, there are cases in which even the putting off which concerns parts of extended actions can involve a non-negligible burden to one's future selves. Imagine that cigarettes are a bit different from the one's we know: suppose that each cigarette you smoke significantly increases the chance of painful illness. So, when you postpone putting an end to your smoking habit, your procrastination with respect to each cigarette imposes an important burden to your future selves. Harming your future self in that way surely amounts to a lack of concern for your future selves.

We have seen that procrastination can also involve one-off actions. In such cases, the harm that is inflicted to one's future self can be quite small. But it can of course also be considerable. Consider again Oblomov and his putting off taking any decision until it is too late. By doing so, Oblomov imposes a considerable burden to his future self. And as Oblomov could not but agree, this burden is clearly not compensated by the present pleasures in which he indulges. So, here too, we seem to have a patent lack of concern for one's future selves.

Finally, I want to consider cases in which the lack of concern is even more obvious. These are cases in which the result of procrastination is not that undesirable things will happen, but that the agent brings it about that her future self has to perform the task that she puts off. For instance, you procrastinate washing the dishes, though you are quite aware that the dishes have to be washed at some point—nobody will do it for you and you don't have the money to buy a new set—and you are aware that by the time you do it, you'll have a huge pile of dirt-encrusted dishes to wash, something you rightly consider much worse than washing the dishes right now. When we can afford to do so, we are often tempted to get someone else to do what we loath doing, such as washing the dishes. What we are trying to do is to pass the buck on to others. It seems to me that this

“buck-passing model” applies to the procrastination cases I just considered. When you fail to wash the dishes now, though you think that washing the dishes now is clearly preferable to doing it later, it seems that you end up consciously burdening your future self, the one who will have to do the chore. In such “buck-passing” cases, it seems particularly clear that you have a lack of concern for your future selves and that you seem to fail to consider your later selves as fully identical with your present self.

Depending on the burden you impose on your future self, cases of imprudent procrastination can be compared to what Parfit calls “deliberate and great imprudence.” Here is how Parfit describes such cases: “For the sake of small pleasures in my youth, I cause it to be true that I shall suffer greatly in my old age. I might, for instance, start smoking when I am a boy. I know that I am likely to impose myself a premature and painful death. I know that I am doing what is likely to be much worse for me.”³³ In such cases, the agent clearly fails to be equally concerned about her future selves as she is about her present self. She fails what Parfit considers to be central to the Self-interest Theory or Classical Prudence,³⁴ that is, the “Equal Concern Claim,” according to which a “rational person should be equally concerned about all parts of his future.”³⁵ Indeed, it is not only that she is not equally concerned with the fate of her future self: she seems to fail to be really concerned at all.

Thus, what explains imprudent procrastination in which a non-negligible burden is imposed on one’s future selves seems to be a lack of concern for one’s future selves. Future selves are considered to be strangers, to whom one can pass the buck and impose a sometimes heavy and uncompensated burden.³⁶ Would the agent fully grasp that it is to herself that she imposes the cost of slowly dying in terrible pain, say, she would react in the same way as someone who is told that she is about to die in terrible pain.

³³ *Reasons and Persons*, p. 317.

³⁴ Parfit calls this “Classical Prudence” in his 1982 paper, “Personal Identity and Rationality,” and “Self-Interest Theory” in *Reasons and Persons*.

³⁵ Parfit, “Personal Identity and Rationality,” p. 231. It should be noted that Parfit argues against this requirement.

³⁶ Note that what compensates for the burden is not necessarily some advantage for the person. If you volunteer for the soup kitchen next Saturday night, your future self is going to have to give up his or her Saturday night to fulfill this commitment. But in so far you rightly judge this sacrifice of yours to be justified, the burden can be considered to be compensated. (Thanks to David Shoemaker for raising this issue, and for the example.)

The lack of concern for one's future self is particularly obvious in cases of clear-eyed procrastination, in which the agent realizes or at least believes that her reasons require not putting off the action. But even in cases of what I called blind procrastination, it would seem that what explains the failure to act is best explained by a lack of concern. Suppose that doing something now is what your reasons require, though you fail to make the corresponding practical judgment. It would seem that had you really been concerned about your future self, you would have been more careful to figure out the reasons you have.

It might be objected that the fact that the clear-eyed procrastinator judges that she ought to perform the action at a certain time shows that she fully identifies with her later selves. Surely, it is because she believes that her present self is identical with her later selves that she thinks she ought to do this action now. Let me assume that this is correct. It will nonetheless be true that when she decides to put off the action it is not only the case that this belief fails to influence her action, but her decision also manifests a clear lack of concern for her future selves. So, despite the supposed belief in her identity over time, which is likely to come with the belief that she ought to be concerned about her future, the procrastinator fails to manifest this concern. This is like judging that one ought to feel an emotion, such as love for mankind, but one fails to experience the given emotion. Thus, identification with your futures selves need not come with a concern for your future selves.

Another worry is that there might be alternative explanations for the procrastinator's behavior. Instead of lacking concern for her future self, she might have a concern for them, which is overridden by some other concern, such as a stronger concern for her present self.³⁷ Now, this is certainly not impossible. In the same way, someone might have an overriding self-concern while also caring to a certain extent for others. The question is whether regularly inflicting burdens that are often heavy to someone is compatible with a genuine concern for that person. Thus, if future selves regularly lose to the present self, the conclusion to draw, it would seem, is that real concern for the future selves is lacking.

³⁷ Thanks to Sergio Tenenbaum for raising this question.

It seems thus that the vast majority of imprudent procrastination cases involve a lack of concern for one's future selves. In such cases, the agent imposes an uncompensated burden on her future selves. Given this, such procrastinators appear to lack the *special concern* philosophers seem happy to believe to be almost universal. Now, imprudent procrastination is recognized to be a pervasive syndrome. In fact, it seems more common than the cases of "great and deliberate" imprudence Parfit considers. Thus, given the pervasiveness of procrastination, it can be inferred that the absence of a special concern for one's future selves is in fact quite common. It is thus a mistake to think that we usually have a special concern for our future selves.

What does this entail for personal identity theories?

Back to personal identity theories

We have seen that there are two arguments against psychological continuity accounts that use the idea of a special concern. The first one is grounded on the *descriptive* claim that we have a special concern for our future selves, while the second one starts from the *normative* claim that we have reason to have or are justified to have such a special concern. I will call the former the *descriptive argument* and the latter the *normative argument*.

Although recent debates often start with the descriptive claim, it is the normative argument that is in fact discussed. This gives the impression that the two arguments are not clearly distinguished. On a more charitable reading, the descriptive claim is just meant to be a warm-up for what is considered to be the real argument, which is the normative argument. However, I think it is useful to distinguish the two lines of thought. For one thing, this allows for a better understanding of how they relate to each other. As I will suggest, the two arguments are in fact intimately related.

Let me start with the first argument. Quite clearly, this argument is threatened by the claim that we often fail to have a special concern for our future selves. The descriptive argument starts from the observation that we have a special concern for our future selves and concludes that this makes for a problem for psychological continuity theories. This could be so because from the fact that we have a special concern for our

future selves, it can be concluded that we *believe* that we are numerically identical with our future selves. Theories that suggest the contrary would lack intuitive plausibility. Or this could be so because from the fact that we have such a concern, it can be inferred that it is likely that we *are* numerically identical with our future selves. For if we were not numerically identical with our future selves, we surely would not have the erroneous belief that we are, and thus, we surely would lack the special concern. More modestly, one could at least argue that an explanation of why we have such an erroneous belief is required. These might be less than watertight conclusions, but an argument along those lines would nonetheless have some force. It would in any case shift the burden of proof in favor of those who oppose psychological continuity accounts. But of course, if I am right to claim that we often fail to have such a special concern for our future selves, no version of this argument can even take off.

The normative argument, however, seems unthreatened by the present considerations. It argues from the premise that we have reason to have a special concern for our future selves, to the conclusion that theories that question the belief that we are numerically identical with our future selves are wrong. The reason is that such theories could not explain why we have reason to have a special concern. Now, it could of course be true that we have reason to have such a special concern even if in fact we happened to lack any concern for our future selves. At most, the requirement entails that we *can* have such a concern, something nobody doubts.

It seems to me, however, that the supposed fact that we normally have such a concern nonetheless plays a role in the argument. The reason is that the normative argument seems to be threatened by a petition of principles that can be avoided only if the normative claim is grounded on the descriptive claim. Suppose you in fact entirely lack any concern whatsoever for your future selves and some benevolent philosopher (or economist) tries to convince you that you ought to have such a concern. What would she tell you? Quite naturally, she would try to convince you that your present self is identical with your future selves, so that the pain that will result from some inconsiderate present action of yours will be one that hurts yourself—you will feel this pain in your own bones. Now, this argument might work with you. But it certainly will not work with someone who has doubts about her permanent existence. In particular, that consideration can

hardly be used in an argument against theories that are accused of severing the link between present and future selves. Now, compare this case to that of trying to convince someone who presently has a special concern for her future self into thinking that she has a reason for having such a concern. This does not seem to require much argument. The reason, it seems, is that someone who has the concern in question is likely to believe that she is identical with her future self. And she will take this fact to be a reason to have the concern in question. Given this, the descriptive claim appears to have more than a rhetorical role to play in the argument. The opponent of psychological continuity accounts has to add it to his premises to try and get his opponent to adopt the normative claim. But then, the normative argument is not in better shape than the descriptive argument. In particular, the doubts that can be raised with respect to the claim that we normally have a special concern for our future selves undermine both the descriptive and the normative argument against psychological continuity accounts.

Conclusion

By way of conclusion, I would like to suggest what seems to be a neglected strategy against procrastination.³⁸ The picture of procrastination I have sketched suggests that our relation to our future selves is not importantly different from the relation to our fellow human beings. Given this, it is plausible to claim that what one has to do to cope with procrastination is the same as what one has to do to get rid of a lack of concern for one's fellow human beings. In both cases, one has to increase one's concern. Now, in the moral case, it is agreed that a good strategy for this is to imaginatively identify with the other.³⁹ One has either to imagine being in the shoes of this other person or else to imagine feeling what she feels from her own point of view, given her psychological make-up. This will help because such an empathic engagement with others tends to come with an increased concern for others. Thus, the coping strategy I want to propose to the

³⁸ It is mentioned neither in Andreou, "Coping with Procrastination," nor in Joe Heath and Joel Anderson, "The Extended Will."

³⁹ This is sometimes called "empathizing" or "perspective taking." As cases of psychopathy show, the technique is not infallible. See Shaun Nichols, *Sentimental Rules. On the Natural Foundations of Moral Judgment*, chap. 2, and Bruce Maxwell, *Professional Ethics Education. Studies in Compassionate Empathy*, esp. pp. 62-67.

procrastinator consists in the imaginative identification with the fate of her future selves. Had Oblomov attempted to imaginatively identify with his future selves, he might well have accomplished what was needed to avoid his sad fate.

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